



WHAT WOULD JESUS SAY TO SOMEONE LIKE LEELAH ALCORN?¹

Garrett Kell | Pastor
Delray Baptist Church
Arlington, Virginia

On December 28, 2014 a 17-year old high school student apparently committed suicide after a difficult journey with confusion over gender identity. In his suicide note, Josh Alcorn said that since he was 4 years old he felt like “a girl trapped inside a boy’s body.” Because of this Josh desired to be called “Leelah” and wished for people to relate to him as a woman. I will refer to Josh as “Leelah” in this article, but will also refer to him as a male, please bear with me, even if you passionately disagree with either of those choices.

This is an excerpt from Leelah’s final words posted shortly before taking his own life:

When I was 14, I learned what transgender meant and cried of happiness. After 10 years of confusion I finally understood who I was. I immediately told my mom, and she reacted extremely negatively, telling me that it was a phase, that I would never truly be a girl, that God doesn’t make mistakes, that I am wrong. If you are reading this, parents, *please* don’t tell this to your kids. Even if you are Christian or are against transgender people don’t ever say that to someone, especially your kid. That won’t do anything but make them hate them self [*sic*]. That’s exactly what it did to me.

¹ This article was originally published on Garrett Kell’s blog (“What Would Jesus Have Said to Leelah Alcorn,” *All Things for God*, January 2, 2015, accessed March 9, 2015, <http://garrettkell.com/what-would-jesus-have-said-to-leelah-alcorn/>) and later published at the ERLC blog (“What Would Jesus Say to Someone Like Leelah Alcorn,” *Ethics and Religious Liberties Commission*, January 7, 2015, accessed March 9, 2015, <http://erlc.com/article/what-would-jesus-say-to-someone-like-leelah-alcorn>). We offer it again as it responds pastorally to the pain experienced by men and women like Leelah Alcorn. May God be pleased to use it to minister to you and draw many to Christ.

My mom started taking to a therapist, but would only take me to Christian therapists, (who were all very biased) so I never actually got the therapy I needed to cure me of my depression. I only got more Christians telling me that I was selfish and wrong and that I should look to God for help.

The letter goes on with sad details that I hope none of us are ever tempted to write or left to read in the wake of losing a loved one in such a tragic way. Leelah’s final request was, “my death needs to mean something.” I could not agree more.

It is heart-wrenching to know that a young person was so overwhelmed with pain that their only response was to stop living. That should mean something. Whether you’re LGBT, Christian, liberal, conservative, religious, or otherwise—we are humans and a tragedy like this should lead us to stop, weep, pray, and take notice.

For me, it made me wonder what I would say to my own child if they felt the same way Leelah did. And more importantly, it made me wonder, *what would Jesus say to someone who feels the same way Leelah did?*

I do not know exactly what Jesus would say to them, but there are a few truths from the Bible that give me a pretty good idea.

1. JESUS WOULD SAY, “YOU ARE MADE IN MY IMAGE, AND I LOVE YOU.”

Just like Leelah, all people are wonderfully made in God’s image (Gen 1:26–28). We are each knit together in our mother’s womb (Ps 139:13–14) and brought safely into this world to walk as an image bearer of God. When people see you, they see a reflection of the glory of the God who made you.

Jesus would say to you that you have value and worth because God made you. He would say something like, “no matter what anyone tells you, you are valuable and I love you. Come and find refuge in my faithful arms, I made you and I will protect you” (Ps 91:4).

2. JESUS WOULD SAY, “YOU ARE BROKEN, JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE.”

Leelah was an image bearer of God, but he was a broken one. Just like you are. Just like I am. Every person who has ever been born, except Jesus, is deeply and totally affected by the curse of sin (Ps 51:4; Rom 5:12). We are all relationally, sexually, morally, rationally—broken. Sin does this to us. It corrupts our feelings and desires and understanding of life and of ourselves. We are all aware of this brokenness, though we experience it in different ways.

Jesus would say to you there is hope for your brokenness because “in me you can have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

3. JESUS WOULD SAY, “YOU HAVE A UNIQUE STRUGGLE, AND I WILL USE IT.”

There is a scene in the Bible where Jesus declared that a man was born blind so “that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:3). God works in the midst of our fallen, sinful, broken lives for his glory. In fact, he only uses broken, sinful, needy people who have sinful struggles.

That does not give us an excuse to give into temptation, but it does give us hope that God can use even the most heinous sinful struggles to display his grace and sufficiency in our lives. If God did this with a self-righteous murderer like the apostle Paul (Acts 9) and an impulsive denier like Peter (John 21), he can do it with you and me.

Jesus would say something like this to you, “I know you do not understand how I can use your struggle and your pain, but I can. I can work all things together for the good of those who love me and are called according to my purpose—I can even use your struggle with transgender feelings in ways you cannot imagine” (Rom 8:28).

4. JESUS WOULD SAY, “I CAME TO RESCUE PEOPLE LIKE YOU, SO TRUST IN ME.”

Jesus didn’t come to rescue people who had it all together. In fact, he said “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). It may seem insensitive to talk about sin at a time when you already feel so unloved and misunderstood, but all of our confusion about who we are in life flows from this very issue.

All of us, whether we consider ourselves straight or gay or transgender or anything else, are sinners. That means that we have disobeyed God’s design in every imaginable way. In the way we think, the way we talk, the way we treat others—the ways are too many for us to count. But God has counted our sins, none have escaped his eye (Ps 69:5).

But in spite of our rebellion against God, he still loves us. There’s a place in the Bible where we are told, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Jesus came to rescue us from our sin by dying in the place of sinners and then rising from the dead to forgive us of our sins.

For those who truly believe in Jesus, God will never turn away (John 6:37) and rather than count all their sins against them, he will forgive them and throw them “as far as the east is from the west” (Pss 32:1–2, 103:11–12; 2 Cor 5:17–19).

Anyone who says that is a message of hate is not listening to what has really been said. That is the greatest act of love anyone could ever show us (John 15:13). Jesus laid down his life so that we could be forgiven and made right with God. Does this new relationship change us? Yes, in every way. But please do not dismiss this good news because God calls us to change. He only wishes to transform us into the image of his own dear Son (Romans 8:29). He is better than whatever else we wish to hold on to. Ask God if it is really true that Jesus died for you.

5. JESUS WOULD SAY, “THE JOURNEY IS HARD, BUT IT IS WORTH IT AND I WILL HELP YOU.”

Just because someone becomes a Christian, does not mean things get easy. There is still much pain in this life. People you love will still hurt you at times. Some people will still misunderstand you. You will still struggle with sin—in all sorts of ways (Rom 7:15–19). Your affections will change toward sin, but often that change doesn’t happen all at once and sometimes it happens very slowly (2 Cor 3:18).

You may never “feel” like your body looks. Your sexual desires may never be redirected. But as you walk with Jesus you will understand and respond to your passions differently. This may be a struggle

for a long time, possibly for your whole life. But Jesus promises that you don't have to carry the weight alone. He says to you "come to me all you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28).

If you are a born again child of God (John 1:12), your primary identity is now rooted in God's acceptance of you in Christ. This radically alters the way you see everything, including your gender identity. This journey of understanding how to please God in spite of your struggles may be daunting but it will be worth it because it comes with the promise "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Heb 13:5).

6. JESUS WOULD SAY, "YOUR PARENTS AREN'T PERFECT, BUT THEY LOVE YOU."

I am a parent and as I've reflected on this heart-breaking story, I weep for Mr. and Mrs. Alcorn. I cannot imagine how anguishing it must have been to see their child struggling and despairing over such deep questions. I'm sure they wish they had answers to help their child understand why God allowed this pain into their child's life and how to trust God in the midst of it all. I'm sure they wish they could take their child's pain and bear it themselves.

Some will scorn Christian parents for attempting to help their child live according to their biological sex, but ridicule is not the answer. You may be upset that it sounds like I'm taking the parent's side. I'm only saying that sympathy needs to go both ways in a situation like this.

Parents who love God and love their children will do all they can to help their child live in God's perfect ways. How parents do this will sometimes be right and sometimes be wrong. There are no easy answers for parents either. I wish there were.

If you are at odds with your parents like Leelah was, I want to encourage you to be patient with them. Your parents aren't perfect, but I suspect they do love you—even if their love feels oppressive. There is a great difference between being an abusive parent and a parent that in good faith is trying to help guide their child.

If your parents are pointing you toward trusting Jesus, don't receive that as unloving—it is the most loving thing anyone could ever do for you. If they are doing it in a way that hurts you, talk with them and pray for God to help you not give up.

7. JESUS WOULD SAY, "GO TO MY PEOPLE, THEY WILL WALK WITH YOU IN GRACE AND TRUTH."

Many of your friends may tell you that the church is filled with hateful, bigoted, backwards people. Sadly, there are some people who do horrible things in the name of Christ—things that Jesus himself would condemn. Sometimes Christians fall short of Jesus' standard of love, but there are countless others who are trying by the grace of God to do better. You need to find a church that is not Christian in name only. Find a Bible-believing, Spirit-led community that will love you and walk with you

Jesus came "in grace and truth" (John 1:17) and his people are to live in the same way (John 15:12). The church is filled with people who need your help to walk in humility before God, and you need them to do the same (Heb 3:13, 10:24–25). Jesus would tell you that you should not struggle alone, and that the people who tell you the truth are the people you can trust the most.

A true church is a community of people who are patient and compassionate, because Jesus has been patient and compassionate with them. They are a people who will help you fight against your sins, because Jesus has forgiven their sins and helps them fight against their own sins. You may be surprised to find how many Christians there are who struggle with the same kinds of things you do.

8. JESUS WOULD SAY, “DON’T GIVE UP ON LIFE, I MAKE LIFE WORTH LIVING.”

There are some struggles that feel like they are too much to bear. Sometimes it seems as if ending your life will bring you the peace that has been so fleeting up until now. Maybe it feels like the only way to silence those who hurt you or get the attention of those who won’t listen to you.

If this is how you feel, Jesus would say do not give up because “the Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Ps 34:18). He would say your weeping is not ignored and “I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears” (2 Kgs 20:5). Jesus would tell you that he made you and he has all your days numbered in his book (Ps 139:16).

He would tell you to not give up on life because he knows how he plans to work all of this together for your good if you will surrender to him (Rom 8:28). And he would tell you that a day is coming when God “...will wipe away every tear from (your) eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4).

This is the promise for those who trust in Christ. Do not give up on life, but cling to the Jesus who will bring you through the many trials and temptations you are facing.

DRAW NEAR TO JESUS, AND HE WILL DRAW NEAR TO YOU

Some will say that because I am a Christian and believe the Bible to be true that I am the kind of person who causes deaths like Leelah’s. If you feel that way, please look past any of my shortcomings in this article and consider Christ himself. Take up the Bible and read about Jesus for yourself.

There are no easy answers for any of our brokenness, including the kind of brokenness that Leelah Alcorn knew so deeply. But that does not mean that his death should mean nothing. It should lead us to listen to one another’s stories rather than spew hate at one another. Jesus is the hope for those who are LBGT, just as he is the hope for everyone else. He is the one who understands us, and our brokenness, even when no one else does. Draw near to him in faith and ask him if this is true and he will draw near to you (James 4:8).